

“THE MARKS OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY”
(Ephesians 4:13-16)

Most kids, at one time or another, will hear their parents say, “Grow up!” or “Act your age!” This usually comes after they do something foolish or irresponsible, and their parents have reached their breaking point in waiting for them to exhibit some semblance of maturity. Every parent wants their kids to grow up to be fully functioning adults, but what does that look like? How do you know when you’re a grown-up? Someone came up with the following list... You know you’ve arrived at adulthood when:

- You watch the weather channel.
- You hear your favorite song in an elevator.
- You get Christmas cards from your insurance company.
- You’re excited when you get socks for Christmas.
- You actually change your oil every 3000 miles.
- You laugh at your parent’s jokes.
- You hear yourself telling your kids the same things your parents told you.

I’m sure you could add many more things to this list, but just as there are indications that you have grown up physically, there are also indications that you have grown up spiritually – and that’s what we want to look at today as we continue our study of Ephesians.

In the first sixteen verses of chapter 4 the Apostle Paul has been talking about the unity and purpose of the church. The church is made up of born-again believers whom God has called out of the world and set apart to Him. The church is not just another group or organization – we are the body of Christ on earth – His hands and feet called to carry out His plans and purposes. Paul wants us to grasp our high and lofty calling and what God has put us on earth to do.

Paul begins in verses 1-6 by exhorting us to keep the unity that we have through being joined together in one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all. Then in verse 7-12 Paul talks about how Christ builds His church. Having ascended back to heaven, He gives gifts to each believer to continue His work on earth and build up the church. Today in verses 13-16 Paul tells us that goal of all the activities and ministries of the church is that we grow to become fully functioning, mature spiritual adults. Let’s begin by reading verses 11-16...

“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Last week in verses 11-12 we saw that God builds or grows the church by gifting certain leaders to equip the people of the church to carry out the ministry of the church. Now in verses 13-16 Paul states that the goal of all the ministries that take place in the church is spiritual growth – God wants each believer to grow up to be spiritually mature adults.

What does that mean? What does that look like? How will we know when we've arrived? When our kids were growing up, we would have them stand against a door and mark their growth with a ruler, so that each year we could see how many inches they had grown. In the same way, in verses 13-16 Paul gives six marks of spiritual growth – six signs that should be evident in a spiritually mature believer and church.

The first mark of spiritual maturity is **unity**. Verse 13 says, *“until we all reach unity in the faith.”* The word “reach” is used nine times in the book of Acts to refer to travelers arriving at their destination. As believers we are on a journey, and the word “until” tells us that we are to continue ministering to one another until our goal is reached.

The first goal is “unity in the faith.” Faith refers to the core truths of the Christian faith – the settled body of doctrine that the New Testament writers called “the faith” or “the gospel.” These core truths of the faith are the teachings of the apostles as recorded in the Bible. A mature church holds fast to the Word of God, and stands united in the belief that the Bible is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice. That's why we make it a practice each time we come together to open up the Word and study it, understand what it is saying to us, and then seek to live by what it says.

Unity takes place when we're like-minded. We all come to church with different ways of thinking, different experiences and perspectives, but we subjugate everything to the Word of God. We may hold different views on minor points of theology – what we would call “secondary issues,” but we are of one-mind when it comes to the major, foundational issues such as the deity of Christ, salvation by grace, and the authority of the Bible. A good example of being like-minded is a band or orchestra made up of a variety of instruments, but each member follows the same page of music – and when every person plays its part, and follows the conductor, harmonious music results. The first mark of church maturity is unity in the faith.

The second mark of spiritual maturity is **knowledge**... *“until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.”* The Bible uses two Greek words for knowledge. One is an empirical knowledge in which you know about someone, and the other is an experiential knowledge in which you know someone personally and intimately. The word Paul uses – *epignosis* – refers to experiential knowledge. Paul not only wants us to know about Christ, but experience a deep, abiding relationship with Him. In Philippians 3:10 Paul said his primary goal in life – his passion and priority – was to know Christ. At the time He wrote this he had been walking with the Lord for almost 30 years, yet he was still pursuing knowing Christ.

The Christian life is far more than head knowledge – it is about having a deep, intimate relationship with Christ. This is what Paul meant in 3:17 when he prayed that Christ would dwell in our hearts – He's already there, but the idea is that He would make Himself at home in our hearts and not just be an occasional guest, but a permanent resident.

The closest example of this kind of intimacy on earth is marriage. Over the course of many years as you talk and communicate, and you share life together, you get to know your spouse better than any other person. You get to know their heart, you get to know how they tick, how they think, what motivates them, and what shows love to them.

Like a marriage relationship, intimacy with Christ is developed by spending time together, by talking to Him through prayer, listening to Him through His Word, and expressing your love and feelings to Him in worship. As you walk daily with Him, your knowledge of Him grows. The sign of a mature church is not just that we attain a lot of knowledge about Christ, but that we cultivate an intimate walk with Him.

The third mark of spiritual maturity is **Christ-likeness**... *“until we become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”* The grand goal in the Christian life is to be like Christ – so that live like Jesus lived, we treat people the way Jesus did, we respond to trials the way Jesus did, we show the love and compassion that Jesus showed, and we humble ourselves and be servants like Jesus did.

A sculptor was once asked how he created his great masterpiece of Robert E. Lee. He said, “I just got a big block of marble and chipped away anything that did not look like Robert E. Lee.” Likewise, God wants to chip away anything in our lives that does not look like Christ. The process of looking like Christ does not stop until we have “attained to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” The fullness of Christ is the totality of everything He is – His attributes, His character, His perfection, His holiness, His power, and His love. The goal of every Christian is to be filled completely with Christ, so that when the world looks at us, they see a glimpse of Christ.

This side of heaven we will never reach the goal of being perfectly like Christ, but 1 John 3:2 says, when Christ returns, we will be like Him – perfectly conformed to His image. Until then we are a work in progress. The goal is for us to grow up, to change, to transform from being a spiritual child to becoming a spiritual adult.

Everyone loves babies – whenever a new baby comes to church for the first time a big circle forms around them and everyone has big smiles – we love babies – but we expect babies to grow up. If a six-year-old does not know how to walk or talk or feed himself, something’s very wrong. If a teenager or adult still has temper tantrums and acts like a two-year-old, we would naturally tell that person to grow up. In the same way God expects His children to grow and mature and become more like Christ.

Many churches, including ours, like to say, “Come as you are.” Just as Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners, and reached out to the broken and downtrodden, we are to be a gracious, welcoming church to people in whatever spiritual state they’re in. But every biblical church should add the phrase: “Come as you are, *but don’t stay that way.*” When you come to faith in Christ and you’re exposed to the teaching of God’s Word, and as the Holy Spirit works in your life, there can’t help but be a change in the way you think and act.

God didn’t save us to stay where we are – He saved us to be transformed into the image of Christ. This means as a church we remain loving and accepting – welcoming anyone to our church – while at the same time spurring and encouraging one another to grow and change, becoming more and more like Christ. We should say, “Come to church as you are, but leave a different person than you were.”

The fourth mark of spiritual growth is **stability**. Verse 14 says, “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.” When we grow in the unity of the faith, when we grow in the knowledge of the Son of God, and grow in Christ-likeness, the result is that we will no longer be infants.

One of the signs of spiritual infancy is a lack of knowledge and discernment – that’s why new believers need the body of Christ to help them grow and mature. Paul uses the imagery of being tossed back and forth by the waves, like a small boat out in the ocean that is at the mercy of whatever direction the waves go. It is blown here and there, helplessly adrift at sea. A large ship, on the other hand, barely feels the waves because it’s big and stable and able to endure whatever comes against it.

The concern for every believer, especially newer believers, is that they will be grounded in the Word of God so that they’re not “blown here and there by every wind of teaching.” They need to be in church community, being disciplined and taught the Word so that they will have knowledge and discernment.

Paul says that naïve, spiritual infants are easily fooled by the “*cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.*” Nearly every book in the New Testament warns us about false teachers and prophets who try to lure unsuspecting believers away from truth. Jesus said, “They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” They’re like the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*. He puts on grandma’s clothes and when Little Red Riding Hood comes to visit, he pretends to be grandma. Little Red Riding Hood falls for his trick and thinks it really is grandma. It isn’t until one of his ears is exposed that she recognizes him as a wolf, who then chases her and tries to eat her.

Satan targets sheep that are vulnerable and tries to deceive them and lure them away from the truth. For several decades the Judeo-Christian foundation of truth has been under attack, and the results of that attack are being realized on a daily basis. Instead of being grounded in truth, our culture has bought into the idea that truth is whatever you want it to be. Truth no longer is based in objective reality – so that everyone looking up at a blue sky naturally says the sky is blue because it is blue – instead, truth is what you think truth is – if you want to say the sky is green, that is your truth and who is anyone else to tell you differently.

This kind of individual, subjective truth is so pervasive that many Christians have unknowingly bought into it. Rather than base their beliefs on the Bible, may base their beliefs on feelings or experiences. This is what Paul is talking about here – spiritual infants who are not grounded in the Word will be blown here and there by the latest trend or philosophy, and as a result will not grow to be fully-functioning, mature adults.

The church is designed to be a safe place where people in all stages of spiritual growth can hear the truth, be reinforced by the truth, and live out the truth. All week long we get pounded by messages from the world that are hostile to God and His divine design for life. In church we hear a different message – a uplifting, redemptive message grounded in truth – and that truth builds conviction – and conviction stabilizes our souls in the midst of the storm.

The fifth mark of spiritual maturity is **speaking the truth in love**. Verse 15 says, “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” Instead of being tossed here and there by every false doctrine that comes along, we are to grow up to be like Christ, who is the head of the church. One of the key ways we do that is by speaking the truth in love. Speaking truth in love is a key sign of spiritual maturity.

Often times this phrase is used to mean that when you share difficult truth, do it in a gentle, kind manner. As Mary Poppins’ says, “A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down.” Difficult truths are best received when they’re delivered in a loving way.

This is true, but the context of the passage is talking about spiritual maturity. Paul is saying, “Instead of being spiritually immature and easily deceived, we are to speak the truth to each other, with love, so that we can grow into maturity.”

As believers we are to be people of the truth – not what we feel is true or wish was true – but what is actually true – and we are to speak this truth in love to one another. This can only take place in the context of church community. Proverbs says, “Iron sharpens iron,” and a big part spiritual growth is surrounding yourself with fellow believers who can sharpen you and encourage you and correct you when you aren’t living by the truth.

Our motivation for speaking truth is love, and the love referred to here is agape love – a sacrificial love that has the best interests of another person in mind. If you truly love your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, you will want to speak truth in order to build them up and become more like Christ. Later in 4:29 Paul will write, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Because we love one another we must speak the truth – and because we are people of the truth we are characterized by love. Truth and love go hand-in-hand, and it takes maturity to do both in a way that benefits others. Some in the body of Christ are naturally gifted at mercy and compassion, and have a more difficult time speaking truth out of fear that they might hurt them or offend them. But if true love is seeking the highest good of others, then that sometimes means confronting them with truth. If they are living in error, it is not loving to overlook it or accommodate it.

Others in the body are gifted at knowing truth and discerning error – and they’re not afraid to confront others with the truth. But truth without love, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, gains nothing – but when combined with love is powerful and transformational. Galatians 6:1 says, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.” The goal is not to hit people over the head with truth, but to restore them to the truth. Before you confront someone, you first need to affirm your love for them, and then prayerfully consider how to best help them – and to seek the Lord for the right timing, the right approach, and the right words that would lovingly restore them back to the truth. When that happens, the body is built up in a way that values truth and loving others.

The sixth mark of spiritual maturity is **involvement** – where every member of the church body is involved in the work of the ministry. Verse 16 says, “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Here Paul goes full circle back to verse 7 where he said that each of us has been given a spiritual gift to minister to one another. God designed the church for every member to be involved in the ministry of the church, and every member has something vital to contribute.

Once again Paul uses the analogy of the human body, and draws out two important ways it parallels the church body. The first is connection – in order for the church body to function, the members of the body must be connected. It’s like the skeleton song we learned as kids – the thigh bone’s connected to the hip bone – the hip bone’s connected to the backbone, and so forth. God designed the church so that we are closely connected in relationship with one another. The biblical word for this is “fellowship.” As they say about work... “half the job is just showing up.” Half of body life is just being here – the only way we can benefit from your spiritual gift is for you to be here, and the only way you can benefit from my spiritual gift is for me to be here.

Like any relationship, becoming part of a church family takes time, but the more investment you make in the lives of people the more connected you become, and the more you grow spiritually.

The second parallel between the human body and the church body is that each part of the body must work together in order to function. Each joint and ligament is designed for a specific purpose, and each joint and ligament must do its job for the whole body to function. When you strain a ligament or pull a muscle, it affects how the rest of your body functions – because everything in your body is designed to work together. You don't think much about your knee or hip or shoulder until it starts hurting and you realize how important that part of your body is.

The church body works the same way – the church body is one organic unit made up of many individual people. Each person in the body has a unique gift to serve the body, and as each person uses their gift the whole body is able to accomplish God's goals and grow into a healthy, mature church.

The question we began with is: How do you know when you've become a spiritually mature adult? It's not a matter of perfection – none of us will be completely mature until the day we see Jesus, but it's a matter of daily, progressive growth where you grow in...

- Unity.
- Experiential knowledge of Christ.
- Look more and more like Christ.
- Spiritual stability by being anchored to the truth.
- Speak the truth in love.
- Deeper involvement in church – being connected in community and using your gifts to bless the body.

God may be saying to some here this morning... "Grow up!" It's time to start maturing spiritually – to be part of God's cosmic plan for the church – and now is the time to start.